

\$5.95

SPRING/SUMMER 1989

CALIFORNIA HISTORY



RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

The Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island: A New Hypothesis on Her Origin

by Marla Daily



Plaque in the Santa Barbara Mission cemetery garden honoring Juana Maria, the Lone Woman removed from San Nicolas Island in 1853. The exact location of her remains within the cemetery is unknown. *Courtesy William B. Dewey*

Was the "Lone Woman" of San Nicolas Island a native Nicoleño? The currently accepted view, as first articulated by anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, is that native Nicoleños were speakers of a Gabrieliño dialect, shared also with the adjacent mainland Indians.¹ New information, when combined with a review of certain previously published facts, leads to the conjecture that she may not have been a native Nicoleño at all, but in fact an Indian from elsewhere. It is entirely possible that her origins were connected to peoples from the north who were involved in the sea-otter trade in southern California during the early nineteenth century.

The story of the "Lone Woman" of San Nicolas Island is well-known. Her abandonment there sometime around 1836, and subsequent removal to Santa Barbara in 1853, have been recounted numerous times. The few recorded facts regarding her language and culture have been studied for over a century by anthropologists because they have been considered to constitute the only source of information regarding native Nicoleños.² In 1961, novelist Scott O'Dell fictionalized her story in his popular book, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*.³ Universal Studios filmed the novelized version in 1964, further heightening public awareness. The late anthropologist Travis Hudson of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History meticulously reviewed both published and unpublished accounts of information concerning the Lone Woman, adding significantly to the body of knowledge available.⁴

Periodically, new information is discovered concerning the woman who was baptized on her deathbed as Juana Maria, as her story continues to be spread both by oral tradition and by scholars investigating further facts concerning Juana Maria's circumstances. A recently-discovered unpublished manuscript by Emma Hardacre, an author investigating the subject in 1880, led to a further review of

available information. Particular attention was paid to the nature of the California sea otter trade, Juana Maria's language, and an account of the physical appearance of her San Nicolas Island dogs. The following is a presentation of facts supporting a new hypothesis regarding her origin.

EMMA HARDACRE'S DIARY

During a 1986 oral interview of native Santa Barbaran Isaac (Ike) Bonilla, who was born in 1903, the author was surprised to find among his library a leatherbound book containing undated holograph notes written during the 1870s by Emma Hardacre, Santa Barbara's nineteenth century expert on the Lone Woman of San Nicolas.

Mr. Bonilla, a Santa Barbara historian and collector of "Santa Barbarana," had purchased the logbook some decades ago from a used book dealer whose name had been forgotten. The book, twelve and one-half inches tall by eight inches wide, contains several hundred pages, only six of which were used by Hardacre to write notes pertaining to San Nicolas Island. (The majority of pages, written in an unknown hand, contain accounting information for a business in the year 1866. Seventy-four of the book pages have been covered over with newspaper clippings in the form of a scrapbook, some of which mention Emma Hardacre or her niece, Elizabeth Mason.)

Emma Hardacre had arrived in Santa Barbara in 1876, 23 years after the Lone Woman's death.⁵ According to an interview conducted with Hardacre in 1913 by John P. Harrington,⁶ she was asked to research the subject of the Lone Woman by three Santa Barbarans—a Dr. Dimmick, Henry C. Ford, and James Calkins. Hardacre's work on the subject culminated in the publication of a popular account in *Scribner's Monthly* in 1880.⁷ Of particular importance in the logbook containing Hardacre's

holographic notes is the following unpublished, undated entry:

There is a doubt in my own mind whether the woman was Indian. There is a rumor that a very short time before the island was depopulated, a woman was cast ashore from a wreck, and that shortly after she gave birth to a child. This information has reached me since the material was gathered for my article as originally published. The search for facts was undertaken by four persons, Dr. (L. N.) Dimmick, Henry Chapman Ford, artist, and James Calkins, Banker all three residing in Santa Barbara and now deceased. They interested me in the subject, and by interpreters the Spanish and Indian residents of Santa Barbara from 1853 were interrogated. At that time (1879) the principal actors in the rescue were living. As I sifted the material the doubt arose in my mind as to the woman being a native Islander. Her manner of meeting her rescuers was not that of a wild woman, but of one who had knowledge of the amenities of life. Her entrance into civilized homes, was not that of a creature utterly unfamiliar with house conveniences—her tact in meeting strangers, receiving their gifts politely, and after they were gone—distributing them among the children of her host. Her conversing continuously in a tongue unknown to any—but evidently a language with which she was thoroughly familiar—no hesitation or forgotten phrases. A search was made for the people from San Nicholas (*sic*) but they were few and scattered over the country, and were never located. They were simply Mission Indians. She told her story by expressive pantomime and what seemed to be an account of shipwreck—swimming—and looking for rescue—the pictures on the wall of the cave.⁸

Hardacre was interviewed by John P. Harrington in 1913, the notes of which were published by Travis Hudson.⁹ Nowhere in this interview does Harrington report Hardacre's doubt about the Lone

Woman's origin, and therefore it is not known if her doubts were voiced to him.

SEA OTTER HUNTING

San Nicolas Island had long been the scene of sea otter hunting by various nations, including Russia, the United States, and Spain. Historian Adele Ogden identified vessels engaged in the California sea otter trade during the sixty-two-year period from 1786 to 1848, during which political conflicts and competition developed among otter hunters around the Channel Islands.¹⁰ It is known that San Nicolas Island was the scene of some of this activity and conflict. It is also known that women occasionally accompanied the foreign ships. In 1856 the *Sacramento Daily Union* reported:

In the year 1811, a ship owned by Boardman & Pope of Boston, commanded by Capt. Whittemore, trading on this coast, took from the port of Sitka, Russian America, about thirty Kodiak Indians, a part of a hardy tribe inhabiting the Island of Kodiak, to the islands in the Santa Barbara channel, for the purpose of killing sea otter, which were then very numerous in the neighborhood of these islands. Capt. Whittemore, after landing the Kodiaks on the island, and placing in their hands fire arms and the necessary implements of the chase, sailed away to the coast of Lower California and South America.

In the absence of the ship, a dispute arose between the Kodiaks and the natives of the islands, originating in the seizure of the females by the Kodiaks. The Kodiaks, possessing more activity, endurance and knowledge of war, and possessing superior weapons, slaughtered the males without mercy, old and young. On the island of San Nicolas, not a male was spared. At the end of a year, Capt. Whittemore returned to the islands, took the Kodiaks on board, and carried them back to Sitka.¹¹

There is a doubt in my own mind, whether the woman was Indian. There is a rumor that a very short time before the Island was depopulated, a woman was cast ashore in a wreck, and that shortly after she gave birth to a child. This information has reached me since the material was gathered for my article as originally published. The search for my article, Henry Chapman by four persons ^{for} Dr. Drinnock, Banker and artist, and James Barber - and now all three residing in Santa Barbara - and now deceased. They interested me in the subject, and by interpreters all the residents of Santa Barbara ^{in 1853} ^{and} were of Santa Barbara that time (1879) the principal actors in the rescue were living. As I sifted the material the doubt arose in my mind as to ^{my} ^{being} a native Islander. Her manner of the American rescuers, was not that of a wild woman, but of one who had knowledge of the civilized of life - Her entrance into ^{my} ^{home} ^{being} ^{her} ^{home} ^{with} ^{house} ^{conveniently} ^{her} ^{to} ^{live} ^{with} ^{her} ^{children} ^{of} ^{her} ^{host} ^{the} ^{conversing} ^{continuously} ⁱⁿ ^a ^{language} ^{which} ^{she} ^{had} ^{thoroughly} ^{for} ^{one} ^{of} ^{the} ^{various} ^{Indian} ^{tribes} ^{obtainable} ^{was} ^{made} ^{for} ^{the} ^{people} ^{from} ^{San} ^{Nicholas} ^{and} ^{what} ^{they} ^{were} ^{scattered} ^{by} ^{expressive} ^{mission} ^{Indians} ^{never} ^{located} ^{they} ^{were} ^{over} ^{the} ^{country} ^{and} ^{what} ^{he} ^{told} ^{her} ^{story} ^{by} ^{expressive} ^{mission} ^{Indians} ^{seemed} ^{to} ^{be} ^{an} ^{account} ^{of} ^{Shipwreck} ⁻ ^{ruining} ⁻ ^{and} ^{looking} ^{for} ^{us} ^{one} ⁻ ^{the} ^{pictures} ^{on} ^{the} ^{walls} ^{of} ^{the} ^{case}

Emma Hardacre's original diary reveals that there was a doubt in her own mind whether Juana Maria was in fact Indian from San Nicolas Island.
Courtesy William B. Dewey

In 1814, Spain sent orders for its local authorities in California to limit trade with the Russians to agricultural and manufactured products only. As a result of the violation of this order, Russian otter hunter Boris Tasarov, commander of the vessel *Ilmen*, was placed under arrest in Los Angeles in 1815. During his trial, Tasarov stated that he had been in charge of Aleuts left on the Channel Islands by the *Ilmen*. While he and his men had been stationed on San Nicolas Island for seven months, they had obtained 955 otter skins. These skins were deposited on the islands, where a number of hunters were still at work.¹²

Author Phil Orr states that there were more than 450 northwest Indians and 80 Hawaiian hunters on the California coast between 1803 and 1811, some of whom may have become assimilated into Channel Island cultures. Padre Senan of Mission San Buenaventura wrote on June 15, 1816:

Ignacio and certain others of our neophytes returned yesterday from a trip to the Islands where they had gone to look for some gentiles who wished to become converts. Our people brought back 16 of them, and on their first trip last week they brought 20. Among the crowd of yesterday there were four Russian Indians, or from Russia territory.¹³

At the time of the rescue of the Lone Woman from San Nicolas Island in 1853, her rescuing party was itself engaged in sea otter hunting.¹⁴

LANGUAGE

One common thread which reappears consistently throughout the literature is the fact that in 1853 no one could be found who understood the

Lone Woman's language. The *Daily Democratic State Journal* of October 13, 1853, six days before Juana Maria's death, reported:

The wild Indian woman who was found on the Island of San Nicolas, about 70 miles from the coast, west of Santa Barbara, is now at the latter place, and is looked upon as a curiosity. It is stated that she has been some eighteen to twenty years alone on the Island. She existed on shell fish and the fat of the seal, and dressed in the skins and feathers of wild ducks, which she sewed together with the sinews of the seal. She cannot speak any known language—is good looking, and about a middle age. She seems to be contented in her new home among the good people of Santa Barbara.¹⁵

Both Captain George Nidever and Carl Dittman, who were participants in the Lone Woman's removal from San Nicolas Island to Santa Barbara, stated that although various Indian dialects were spoken to her, she was unable to understand them. They also reported that priests sent for various mission Indians to attempt to communicate with her, but as far as they knew, no one was successful.¹⁶ Hardacre attributes four words given as a part of the vocabulary of the Lone Woman: "to-co" (hide), "nache" (man), "te-gua" (sky), and "pinche" (body). There is considerable confusion as to the meaning ascribed to these words. Kroeber identified them as belonging to a Shoshonean dialect. In December of 1913, Harrington recorded on wax cylinders two versions of a song attributed by informants to the Lone Woman. Musicologist Gary Tegler noted that this particular song was rhythmically unique. To date, a search for familiarity between Juana Maria's words and various northwest languages has failed to find any correspondence. Aleut, Koniag, Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, Yupiak, and Inupiaq languages have been examined, thus far without result.¹⁷

DOGS FOUND ON SAN NICOLAS ISLAND

Both Nidever and Dittman reported the presence of dogs on San Nicolas Island at the time of the removal of the Lone Woman. In notes furnished by Dr. Dimmick, Nidever is attributed with the following statement:

In the neighborhood of the huts near the shore we saw seven or eight wild dogs. They were about the size and form of a coyote, of a black and white color. I have seen the same kind of dogs among the Northwest Indians.¹⁸

Additionally, the Reverend Stephen Bowers, in an unpublished manuscript now located in the Southwest Museum, states:

In November, 1915, I met at Alamos Harbor, Santa Cruz Island, George Nidever, 70 or more years of age. He was there (with his wife) engaged in crawfishing. His father, Capt. George Nidever, brought the lone Indian woman from San Nicolas Island to Santa Barbara in 1853. The son, though then a small boy, remembers having seen the woman. Nidever told me that when he was about 10 years old he went to San Nicolas with Capt. who went there to kill the dogs on the island and that all were shot that could be found. I presume this was done so that the island might be safely stocked with sheep. He told me that the dogs were of the Alaskan breed!¹⁹

Captain George Nidever's son was born in 1847, thus placing him and his father on San Nicolas Island to shoot the dogs sometime around 1857, four years after the woman's removal. What stands out as particularly important is the report that the dogs were "of the Alaskan breed." The above accounts lead to the speculation that perhaps the dogs were introduced to San Nicolas Island from the north. Whether or not their introduction to San

Nicolas Island coincided with that of the Lone Woman can only remain speculation.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Given the following facts, there is reason to propose that the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island may have been an Indian from the north, and not a native Nicoleño:

1. Indians from the north, particularly peoples from Kodiak Island and the Aleutian Islands, participated in the California sea otter trade on and around San Nicolas Island during the first part of the nineteenth century. Was this woman on the island as a result of this activity?
2. At the time of her rescue, no one could be found who understood the language spoken by the Lone Woman. Did she in fact speak a language from another Indian territory?
3. Were the dogs on San Nicolas Island, who were described as being of "the Alaskan breed," her companions as a result of circumstances related to her presence on the island?
4. Why did Emma Hardacre, local expert on the subject, doubt the Lone Woman's origin? In her log, she noted that these doubts arose *after* the publication of her article on the subject, the article upon which all subsequent articles have been based. CHS

See notes beginning on page [65].

An anthropologist and authority on the Channel Islands, Marla Daily is the President of the Santa Cruz Island Foundation and author of California's Channel Islands, now in its second edition.

37. Gubser to A. F. Hyde, January 9, 1958, Box 17, GP.
38. Gubser to M. G. Herbert, February 27, 1958, Box 18, GP.
39. Gubser to E. A. Gibbs, July 8, 1958, Box 20, GP. See also Gubser to D. C. Duley, May 19, 1958, Box 19, GP; and Gubser to F. Steere, June 30, 1958, Box 20, GP.
40. Gubser to Paul J. Veath, August 5, 1958; Gubser to R. G. Pettit, August 13, 1958, Box 21, GP.
41. Gubser to M. R. Mackenzie, October 6, 1958, Box 21, GP.
42. Fenno and Munger, *Federal Aid to Education*, 15.
43. Gubser to G. Cass, February 6, 1959, Box 22, GP; Gubser to N. Walsh, April 8, 1959, Box 23, GP; Gubser to J. A. Symen, April 21, 1959, Box 24, GP.
44. Gubser to Chairman G. Barden, March 23, 1959, Box 24, GP.
45. Gubser to R. W. Randall, June 6, 1959, Box 25, GP.
46. Gubser to F. A. Wickett, June 24, 1959, Box 25, GP.
47. Gubser to A. Vatuare, July 11, 1959, Box 25, GP.
48. Fenno and Munger, *Federal Aid to Education*, 15.
49. Gubser to H. Williams, February 17, 1960, Box 29, GP; Gubser to B. Rider, April 6, 1960, Box 30, GP.
50. Gubser to E. Cooley, June 6, 1960, Box 31, GP.

DAILY "Lone Woman," pp. 36-41.

The author would like to thank both Clement Meighan, University of California, Los Angeles Department of Anthropology, and John Johnson, Curator, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, for encouraging the writing of this article. Additionally, I thank John Johnson for providing preliminary comments and suggestions. Isaac Bonilla generously gave me the Hardacre manuscript from his library, and additional reference materials were found in the Channel Islands Archives, Santa Barbara

Museum of Natural History. Linguistic comparisons were made with the help of Michael Krauss, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, and his colleague Jeff Leer. The Santa Cruz Island Foundation, 1010 Anacapa Street, Santa Barbara, California is to be thanked for its continued support of research concerning the California Channel Islands.

1. Alfred Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California* (U.S. Government Printing Office: Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin Number 78, 1925), 633-4.
2. For nearly a century, various anthropologists have looked into the question of Juana Maria. Alphabetically, this incomplete listing includes: Reverend Stephen Bowers; Hal Eberhart; Albert B. Elsasser; J. P. Harrington; Robert F. Heizer; Travis Hudson; Alfred Kroeber; and Clement Meighan. See: Stephen Bowers, "The Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island," *Ventura Weekly Observer*, December 9, 1892, p. 228, and December 16, 1892, p. 238; J. P. Harrington's unpublished notes on file at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History; Clement Meighan and Hal Eberhart, "Archaeological Resources of San Nicolas Island, California," *American Antiquity* 19 (1953): 109-125; Robert F. Heizer and Albert B. Elsasser, *Original Accounts of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island* (Ramona: Ballena Press, 1973).
3. Scott O'Dell, *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).
4. Dee Travis Hudson, "Some J.P. Harrington Notes on the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island," *Southwest Museum Masterkey* 52 (January-March 1978): 23-8; "An Additional Harrington Note on the Lone Woman of San Nicolas," *Southwest Museum Masterkey* 52 (October-December 1978): 151-4; "Additional Harrington Notes on the Lone Woman," *Southwest Museum Masterkey* 53 (July-September 1980): 109-12; "Recently Discovered Accounts Concerning the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island," *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 3 (1981): 187-99.
5. Adelaide Doran, *Pieces of Eight Channel Islands* (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1980), 32-43.
6. Dee Travis Hudson, "Recently Discovered Accounts," 187-99.
7. Emma Hardacre, "Eighteen Years Alone: A Tale of the Pacific," *Scribner's Monthly* (September 1880): 657-64.
8. Original Emma Hardacre logbook in the private collection of the author.
9. See note 6 above.
10. Adele Ogden, *The California Sea Otter Trade 1784-1848* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941).
11. *Sacramento Daily Union*, December 29, 1856.
12. See note 10 above.
13. Phil Orr, *Prehistory of Santa Rosa Island* (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, 1968), 105.
14. George Nidever, "The Life and Adventures of a Pioneer of California Since 1834," *Original Accounts of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island* (Ramona: Ballena Press 1973), 7-15.
15. *Daily Democratic State Journal*, October 13, 1853.
16. See note 6 above.
17. Gary Tegler, "Index of Harrington's Chumash Recordings," *Institute of Archaeology, Occasional Paper Number 3* (Los Angeles 1979), 22-48.
18. Thomas H. Thompson and Albert A. West, *History of Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties* (Oakland: Thompson and West, 1883).
19. See note 5 above.